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THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

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It is hard to imagine what the House of Commons would be like if the Speakership had not evolved in something like its present form, so central to the House's whole way of life is the direction and guidance it receives from its chairman. Most readers of this Factsheet will be aware from watching or listening to broadcasts of the House or from attending debates of something of the duties of the Speaker. It is the purpose of these notes to summarise the principal aspects of the Speakership.

AN ILLUSTRATION APPEARS HERE IN HARD COPY

*Madam Speaker, Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd MP
dressed in state robes*

DUTIES OF THE SPEAKER

The Speaker acts as Chairman during debates, and sees that the rules laid down by the House for the carrying on of its business are observed. In recent years Speakers have tended to have three spells in the Chair: 2.30 to 4.30 pm, 6.30 to 7.30 pm, and a period near the end of the day. For the rest of the time, one of the deputies will preside. It is the Speaker who selects (*or calls*) Members to speak. He or she acts as the House's representative in its corporate relations with outside bodies and the other elements of Parliament, the House of Lords and the Crown. It is also the Speaker who reprimands on behalf of the House an offender brought to the Bar. The Speaker is also responsible for protecting the interests of minorities in the House.

It is obviously essential that debates should be conducted in an orderly way, and unlikely that the course of debate would flow smoothly if there were not some way of regulating who was to speak. The selection of those who are to speak is therefore a very important one for the Chair, and one which has to be handled with tact and discretion. In a debate, official spokesmen or women for Government and Opposition must take part, as well possibly as those for the minor parties, those Members with constituency interests, those who *specialise* in the subject under discussion and those simply with a general interest. The Speaker, therefore, has to balance all these requirements when working out who should be called. Members may press their claims for being called in advance of particular debates, but the decision rests solely with the Speaker. Similar, and very immediate, problems occur when calling at Question Time those who wish to ask Supplementary Questions. At the beginning of certain debates, the Speaker may decide to invoke the 'short speech' rule prescribed in Standing Order No 45A, thus limiting individual speeches between certain specified times to a maximum of ten minutes.

The Speaker must preserve order in the House, and ensure that its rules of debate are observed. For instance, a Member who makes an allegation against another, or expresses himself in language which the rules do not permit, may be directed to withdraw the remark concerned. In the case of grave general disorder, the sitting may have to be suspended. In the case of wilful disobedience by one or more particular Members the Speaker can *name* him or them, which will result in their suspension - for a period - from the House.

The Speaker has to protect the rights of minorities in the House. He or she must ensure that the holders of an opinion, however unpopular, are allowed to put across their point of view without undue obstruction. This is especially important when deciding whether or not to allow the closure to be moved - that is, whether a debate can be brought to a close. If minorities have not been able to make a contribution, this will weigh with the Speaker in assessing whether the closure may be moved.

The Speaker has also to exercise discretion on a number of matters prescribed in the Standing Orders of the House. Examples include decisions as to whether an application for an emergency debate (under Standing Order No 20) is proper to be put to the House, whether to allow a private notice question, and whether a complaint of breach of privilege is legitimate to be pursued in the House. Naturally, the Speaker is called upon on numerous occasions in the Chair to rule as to whether a certain action or point is in accordance with the rules and precedents of the House. A ruling is then made either on the spot or at a later date as circumstances dictate: in either case the Clerks at the Table can be called upon for advice if necessary. The rulings, whether given in the Chamber or privately are printed nowadays in *Hansard*. Standing Order No 31 provides that the Speaker is responsible for deciding which, if any, of a number of amendments to a motion before the House will be called for voting upon. In the case of a Committee of the Whole House, the Chairman of Ways and Means or one of the deputies exercise this power.

The Speaker and three deputies do not vote in Divisions of the House. If, however, there is a tied vote, the occupant of the Chair must exercise a casting vote. For more details of this, see *Factsheet* No 45.

The Speaker must, of course, be above party political controversy and must be seen to be completely impartial in all public matters. All sides in the House rely on the Speaker's disinterest and respect that he or she must stand aside from controversy. Even after retirement, a former Speaker will take no part in political issues. Assuming the office of Speaker will to a great extent mean shedding old loyalties and friendships within the House. The Speaker must keep apart from old party colleagues or any one group or interest and does not use, for instance, the Commons dining rooms or bars. The Speaker does, however, continue as a Member of Parliament dealing like any other with constituents' letters and problems.

It is the Speaker who acts as the spokesman for the House on ceremonial and formal occasions - as for instance, when an address of congratulation was presented to the Queen on the occasion of her Silver Jubilee in 1977. Nowadays such occasions are usually happy events; but in past centuries a Speaker might have been called upon to deliver to an autocratic and even despotic Sovereign a message which might be much less welcome - the reasons, for instance, why the Commons had disagreed to raising a tax for the royal revenues. In fact, nine Speakers in olden times are known to have died a violent death.

The Speaker has a residence at the Westminster Bridge end of the Palace of Westminster. From here begins a formal procession before every sitting of the House, via the Library Corridor, the Lower Waiting Hall, Central and Members' Lobbies to the Chamber, the Speaker being preceded by a Bar Doorkeeper, the Serjeant at Arms with the Mace, and followed by the Chaplain, Secretary and Trainbearer.

The Speaker also has an administrative role, firstly *ex-officio* as Chairman of the House of Commons Commission, which is the employer of all permanent staff of the House. The various domestic committees of the House, including the Finance and Services Committee and the Select Committee on Broadcasting, make recommendations to the Speaker on matters concerning the control of accommodation, services and facilities to Members, including their financial implications.

ELECTION OF A SPEAKER

Speakers are elected at the beginning of each new Parliament (ie after every General Election), or when the previous Speaker dies or retires. The House is presided over by the Father of the House (see **Factsheet** No 24), who calls upon two Members in turn to move and second a motion calling for another named Member to take the Chair as Speaker. Other Members may also speak, and the proposed candidate submits him or herself to the House. Other candidates may be put forward, by means of amendments upon which the House decides before the main question. In fact this situation has occurred only three times during this century, most recently on 27 April 1992, when Miss Betty Boothroyd was proposed as Speaker by means of an amendment to a motion which had put forward Rt Hon Peter Brooke. In a division the House agreed to the amendment by 372 votes to 238, and Miss Boothroyd was duly elected as

Speaker. The occasion stood out as an unusual one for a number of other reasons: the new Speaker was the first to be chosen from the Opposition benches this century; she was only the third to be chosen from Labour Party ranks; and, of course, she became the first woman ever to be chosen by the House as its Speaker.

The procedure is completed on the following day, when the Speaker-elect is called to the House of Lords to receive the Royal Approbation. Thus the choice of a Speaker is not entirely a matter for the Commons alone, reflecting the Speaker's constitutional role as "spokesman" for the House, with rights of access to the Sovereign. At this time the newly confirmed Speaker lays claim on behalf of the Commons to "all their ancient and undoubted rights and privileges".

These procedures are followed even when a Speaker seeks to continue in office in a new Parliament, although they may be more formal in nature. Continuing Speakers are often - but not invariably - returned unopposed at General Elections, when they stand as ***The Speaker seeking re-election***. In any case, they would not campaign.

HISTORY OF THE SPEAKERSHIP

The Speakership dates back under its present title to 1377 when Sir Thomas Hungerford was appointed. Equivalent presiding officers before this time were called *parlour* or *prolocutor*, and have been identified as far back as 1258 when Peter de Montfort is said to have presided over the "Mad Parliament" held at Oxford that year.

The Speaker was often, up to the seventeenth century, an agent of the King, though as stated above, some Speakers encountered difficulties when reporting the view of the Commons to the Monarch. During the Civil War, however, the struggle between Crown and Parliament was reflected in the attitude of Speakers to the House *vis a vis* the King. It is often said the Speaker Lenthall's celebrated reply in the House to King Charles I, where he had come to arrest five Members for treason

May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here, and I humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon that I cannot give any other answer than this to what Your Majesty is pleased to demand of me.

sums up the then new philosophy of the Speaker's duty to the House.

After the Restoration, Speakers were usually associated politically with Governments and often held an office in the Government. Arthur Onslow (Speaker 1728-61) was responsible for slackening these ties and establishing many of the practices associated with the Speaker today. By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of the Speaker being above party was the norm.

SALARY

The Speaker is paid a salary roughly on a par with Cabinet Ministers. Pensions for former Speakers used to be fixed by a special Bill (*Mr Speaker ... 's Retirement Act*) after they resigned, but are now calculated according to the Parliamentary and Other Salaries and Pensions Acts.

OFFICIAL DRESS

On normal sitting days, the Speaker wears a black cloth court suit with linen bands, over which is worn a black silk robe with train. The present Speaker has decided not to wear the full-bottomed wig used by her predecessors.

On State occasions (such as the Opening of Parliament), he or she wears a splendid robe of black satin damask trimmed with gold, at the neck a lace jabot, with lace frills at the sleeves.

APPENDIX

LIST OF SPEAKERS DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1895 - 1905 W C Gully	1959 - 1965 Sir H Hylton-Foster
1905 - 1921 J W Lowther	1965 - 1971 Dr H King
1921 - 1928 J H Whitley	1971 - 1976 J Selwyn Lloyd
1928 - 1943 E A Fitzroy	1976 - 1983 T G Thomas
1943 - 1951 D Clifton Brown	1983 - 1992 B B Weatherill
1951 - 1959 W S Morrison	1992 - Miss B Boothroyd

FURTHER READING

P Laundy: *The Office of Speaker* (1964)

P Laundy: *The Office of Speaker in the Parliaments of the Commonwealth* (1984)

A I Dasent: *Speakers of the House of Commons* (1911)

Sir P Thorne: *Ceremonial and the Mace in the House of Commons* (1980) (for details of official dress)

I am grateful to the former Librarian of the House of Commons, Dr D Menhennet, for commenting on a draft of this Factsheet.

CC Pond rev Pamela Ball January 1993

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